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# **Fictional, Factual, and Flying Space: Throwing at the Theatre in *The Author on the Wheel***

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## **Introduction**

The anonymously-written one-act play *The Author on the Wheel, or, a Piece Cut in the Green Room* premiered at Theatre Royal Drury Lane on April 18, 1785 (*The Daily Universal Register* April 18, 1785). It follows a theatre manager with an awful, yet necessary task on his hands: to substantially revise and cut down a play in between the play's first and second performances. The opening night performance of the play was such a failure that it provoked the audience to throw fruit at the actors to show their disdain; therefore the cast refuses to perform until the script is substantially changed. The revision session in the green room does not go according to plan, and after much insult and humiliation from the manager, cast, and crew, the arrogant author storms out with his manuscript, ready to inflict his awful dialogue on another unsuspecting theatre company.

Spaces in the theatre, due to their dynamic and potent properties, offer a way to examine meanings created by spectators and performers in terms of physical space, fictional space, and even textual space. Through my study of *The Author on the Wheel*, I consider a part of performance that complicates the idea of physical stage space to an extreme (and sometimes even dangerous) degree while somehow managing to avoid much historical and theoretical scrutiny: the thrown object. I investigate the movement between and amongst spaces made by the thrown object. The thrown objects to which I am referring are the apples, pears and oranges hurled toward the stage by the fictional audience in *The Author on the Wheel*. The incident of the thrown object occurs only as a memory in the play, recounted in the after-performance discussion in the green room. Through this dialogue, the characters tell tales of acting on the stage whilst enduring a barrage of fruit.

I will track the object thrown from the audience space to the performance space in two ways. First I examine briefly the historical phenomenon of the thrown object in eighteenth-century London theatre. Secondly, I describe the definition(s) of “prop” as laid out by two difference theorists (Gay McAuley and Andrew Sofer) and, finally, I apply these definitions to both the props and thrown objects in *The Author on the Wheel*. Through this application, I explore the object’s movement through boundaries of definition from “object” to “prop” based on its journey through the very specific spaces of the audience and the stage. I argue that in changing identity from an object to a prop, the thrown object both acquires and produces new meaning.

The object moving across fictional and factual spaces instantly and markedly shifts the spaces involved; the performance space becomes an audience space as the actors watch the drama unfold, while the audience space may turn into a performance space through the very act of the spectator invading the space of the stage. Throwing an object across the boundary of the stage into a fictional world challenges the sharp divide created between onstage and offstage, and between the front of house and the back. In her book *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, McAuley points to this divide in her attempt to emphasise the potent nature of the performance space:

The two groups [spectators and performers] have their designated areas within that space that is, in traditional theatres, quite rigidly demarcated and conceptualized in terms of front and back... the divided yet nevertheless unitary space in which the two constitutive groups (performers and spectators) meet and work together to create the performance experience, is the privileged domain that I shall call the *performance space*. (25-26)

The thrown object, though seemingly a mutinous refusal of the authority of the performance space, actually functions as a joyous declaration of the space created in that specific moment of time. Activated by the bodies in the space, the thrown object proves the existence of the “divided yet nevertheless unitary” space.

### **Throwing in *The Author on the Wheel***

Though now far removed from most mainstream twenty-first-century theatre experiences, the act of pelting remains somewhat in the minds of spectators, if only theoretically. For example, *Rotten Tomatoes*, a website devoted to film news, compiles reviews written by journalists and online critics. If a movie receives more bad reviews than good reviews, the website marks the failure with an icon depicting a “splatted” rotten tomato, thus evoking the tradition of throwing rotten tomatoes at poor performances. Even though stages today remain fruit-free, archival documents demonstrate occasion upon occasion of pelting, and these occasions are not bound by geographical or temporal borders.

Pelting occurred in theatres in many different times periods. The eighteenth century is one of the time periods that experienced pelting regularly, and London theatres were no exception. Leo Hughes’ *The Drama’s Patrons* includes a section on the act of pelting. He devotes almost ten pages to this subject, and makes his feelings regarding the matter very clear. This act of “hoodlumism” was, according to Hughes, a continuation of the “conduct of the noisy and irrepressible segment of playgoers.” The author shares his findings of the phenomenon through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. French dancers and actors often bore the brunt of the missiles, but Hughes points out that audiences showered fruit and vegetables upon the British as well. The theatres threatened to punish those that threw projectiles at the actors or at other audience members, but it seems that police interference only came when an object injured an audience member (43, 45, 49). *The Author on the Wheel*’s account of pelting squares with Hughes’ description, for the actors merely laugh off the incidents since no one was hurt. *The Drama’s Patrons* may decry the practice of pelting (as the eighteenth-century actors may have done as well), but for my purposes the thrown object takes on a life of its own in this highly magnified examination of the spaces of *The Author on the Wheel*.

To begin an exploration of the spatial negotiations involved in pelting, I want to pause and imagine the actual act of the throw. Pelting impacts the performance of a play in a way that other forms of audience participation do not. When an audience takes pleasure in the onstage action, it has the ability to react with applause and cheers. Likewise, when an audience disagrees with or simply dislikes the action onstage, it can take advantage of the live moment as well. Audiences express delight and dissatisfaction audibly as well as visually. Audibly they may yell and hiss, and visually they may stand and gesture. But in addition to these seen and heard markers of discontent, audience members, in the case of pelting, take up arms and hurl missiles,

sometimes of the edible sort: *The Author on the Wheel* mentions apples, oranges, and pears specifically. In this situation, the actors onstage had, up until this juncture, experienced only a picture of violence by the audience; this scene took place apart from their physical, material reality. However heated the audience became, the conflict remained removed from the body of the performer. It is the thrown object that connects and manipulates the spaces of the performer and spectator.

The performance of the throw unfolds through the story told about the prior night's performance in *The Author on the Wheel*. The throws in this case originated from the gallery section of the house and reveal the spatial relationships between actors and spectators. After Drama, the manager, asks if the dramatist Vainwit really believes that spectators came ready to oppose his play, he replies, "Think so! Why my dear sir I know it—I can prove that dozens of Irish-chairmen and bricklayers, laborers with concealed bludgeons went in bodies to the one and two shilling galleries" (Scene 2). Vainwit accuses the labourers watching the show from the galleries of arriving prepared with ammunition to throw at the actors. Gallery seats were the cheapest seats in the house, and consequently the seats farthest from the stage. However, the galleries rose up the back wall of the house and granted the audience members a lofty position from which to pelt; with gravity on their side, the gallery audience could throw fruit at the stage with force and anonymity.

Vainwit's description of the audience's behaviour is corroborated by the experience of the actors on the stage. Sock, an actor in the prior night's performance, shares his experience of the pelting by claiming, "Why sir some pleasant gentleman upstairs, not satisfied with what she [Mrs. Rant, another actor] was saying, threw a Windsor pear with such vehemence against her headdress that it unfortunately gave way and exposed her bald pate and a few hairs of a side. Ha! Ha!" (Scene 2). Another actor, Thespis, tells of the apple that "came whizzing from the gods" and then remembers optimistically, "The Gods saluted me with a few apples and oranges, but having a large wig on they did me no other damage than making the powder fly about" (Scene 2).

All of these examples include the gallery of the theatre. The thrown fruit came from the "gods" (a nickname for those viewing the performance from the galleries). No direct physical contact between spectator and performer occurred, nor were there any accusatory yells or hisses from the galleries. Instead the main method of communication between the galleries and the

stage was the missile. From these first-(fictional) hand accounts, I want to follow the thrown object from the fictional space of the stage to the physical space of the stage, all while considering the highly-malleable nature of both.

### **Theorising the Prop**

The stage prop follows a path not totally unlike the path followed by the thrown object. In fact, the stage prop and the flying fruit bear striking similarities. To begin my investigation into the distinctive but somewhat overlapping qualities of the prop and the thrown object, I return to the spatial theory McAuley lays out for the different areas of the theatre. McAuley describes the spaces of the theatre inhabited by actors as “energized” (90). This then leads to the idea of the prop onstage: what do the objects that are on the stage mean when they are *apart* from the energising actor? She states:

Objects on the stage tend to merge into the background, and they become meaningful only when handled, looked at, or referred to. It is through the agency of the actor that objects are brought to the attention of the audience, and it is the actor that creates the mobility that is characteristic of the theatrical function of the object: the actor can, with a gesture or an act, transform a walking stick into a machine gun, a bundle of rags into a baby, a chair on a table into a mountain. The set conveys a limited amount of information in the absence of the actor, as has just been stated, but becomes a powerfully expressive instrument when occupied and activated by actors. (91)

McAuley places weight and value not on the material object but on the “activation” of the object. The key difference between the thrown object and the prop thus far is that the prop does not require motion for activation. As stated in the above quotation, McAuley believes that an object becomes meaningful through the agency of the person onstage; later in her analysis she further spells out her idea of the “thing” as “prop”:

In general it can be said that the stage object is inanimate, and it is either brought into the presentational space by an actor, or is already present. Furthermore, it is of such nature that it can be touched, moved, or displaced by the actor. The crucial factor in defining the stage object is thus human intervention... A thing

onstage becomes an object if it is touched, manipulated, or even simply looked at or spoken about by an actor. (176)

In short, the actor brings the prop to life through some kind of intentional act, whether they actually move the object or merely direct the audience's attention toward it.

While McAuley deals with the stage object in terms of the spatial negotiations in the theatre, Sofer dives into the complex identity of the prop more fully in his book *The Stage Life of Props*. His goal in this text is to explore "the power of stage objects to take on a life of their own in performance" (5). To this end, he provides a collection of case studies that he examines using production analysis; his book, then, focuses in on the "stage careers" of five different props from the medieval communion wafer to the skull in Jacobean drama (5). Sofer's introduction thoroughly spells out his use of the word "prop," and it is helpful here in providing another way into the study of the thrown object.

According to Sofer, "a prop can be more rigorously defined as *a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of a performance*" (11). His definition is more "rigorously defined" than the dictionary definition which does not create a distinction between props and other things that are on the stage (11). Further, and different from McAuley's definition:

It follows that a stage object must be "triggered" by an actor in order to become a prop (objects shifted by stagehands between scenes do not qualify)... The distinction between props and other kinds of stage objects, then, is a matter neither of diminutive size nor potential portability but actual *motion*. The prop must physically move or alter in some way as a result of the actor's physical intervention. (12)

Thus, if an actor looks meaningfully at an object onstage, McAuley would consider this an example of "human intervention" and therefore consider the object a prop, while Sofer would not include "a look" in the realm of physical intervention. For Sofer, things on the stage require an activation that not only calls the audience's attention to the object, but an activation that physically "move[s] or alter[s]" the items in some way.

Although the two scholars differ on the ways in which an object may be activated in order to transform into a prop, both agree that an object is not a prop because of what it is, but because of what it becomes onstage (Sofer 12, McAuley 176). For example, the manuscript in

*The Author on the Wheel* plays a large role in the overall story. The characters complain about the absurdity of the script while Vainwit praises its merits. But until a character manipulates the script in some way, it is just a stack of papers sitting upon the stage. Vainwit's script moves through the performance space as a prop; the prop in this instance is not only manipulated but also modified. The manager crosses out lines on the pages in order to make the cuts necessary for another performance. Vainwit eventually loses all patience, grabs the script, and storms out of the room. Visibly shaken, Vainwit describes the desecration done to his masterpiece:

Vainwit. Blockheads! Coxcombs! Butchers! / Surveying his manuscript  
wishfully and in great agitation / Here's a cut! One of the finest passages in the  
whole piece. How spitefully it's crossed out—this is that damned fellow Drama's  
own doing; I know the stroke of his own pen from a million {still turning over the  
leaves of the manuscript eagerly} Crossed! Dash! Cut! Whole pages black!  
Black! Nothing but black! These cuts could never have been made with common  
pen and ink—some of the strokes are as broad as my thumb and have that dingy,  
sooty appearance as if they had been made with lamb-black and a painter's brush.  
(Scene 3)

This description shows the extent to which the manuscript was, in Vainwit's eyes, artistically and literally violated. We next see the jilted author entreating Mask, another actor, to join his scheme; Vainwit holds his manuscript tightly throughout this section, as he is convinced someone might steal it away from him. Finally, he leaves for good with his brainchild in tow. The prop of the script plays a part almost as large as the main characters. Because the characters activate the script through physical/human intervention, the stack of papers transforms into a prop.

To this end, the script in *The Author on the Wheel* aptly exemplifies the aforementioned definition of "prop." To explore more deeply the theoretical meanings associated with the objects on stage, Sofer includes a more detailed description of the prop, stating, "a prop is an object that goes on a journey; hence props trace spatial trajectories and create temporal narratives as they track through a given performance" (2). Vainwit's manuscript completes a journey through the backstage of the theatre during the performance of *The Author on the Wheel*. But if the audience buys into the representative life of the script beyond the stage, they will realise that the script actually journeyed much farther than the backstage of the theatre. The script came into



being through Vainwit's pen, travelled to the theatre, came to life in rehearsals (both individual and whole), and then sat in the hands of the prompter during the performance. The performance of the script (which technically occurred *before* the performance of *The Author on the Wheel*) rightly assumes all the focus of the play. Therefore, the script, though physically onstage journeying through the practitioner areas of the theatre, fictionally moves throughout the city, the theatre spaces, and the minds and bodies of the cast and crew. The prop in this light does trace a spatial and temporal narrative as a physical object onstage as Sofer describes, but also crosses the confines of the stage boundaries as a result of its weighty implications. Not just a stack of papers physically manipulated by the actors onstage, the script in *The Author on the Wheel* travels through spaces while creating spaces. In the fictional spaces of the play as well as the factual spaces of the theatre, the script continually shifts the spaces on its journey through time and space.

### **Thrown Objects as Props**

Sofer's description of the prop's spatio-temporal journey creates an opening through which the thrown object might enter the discussion. As stated above, Sofer desires to trace the journeys that props make throughout a performance. He continues this thought by articulating one of his goals in *The Stage Life of Props*:

My first aim in this study is to restore to the prop those performance dimensions that literary critics are trained not to see. These include not only the three-dimensionality of objects as material participants in the stage action, but the *spatial* dimension (how props move in concrete stage space) and the *temporal* dimension (how props move through linear stage time). (2)

Sofer's definition provides a place for objects used in a performance as planned by the author or director. What I propose is an extrapolation of Sofer's definition of the prop to theoretically include the thrown object. Substantial differences separate the prop from the thrown object, but I would like to put those differences aside for the moment for the purpose of exploration. How does the thrown object function when considered as a prop? What journeys (both spatial and temporal) does the thrown object make? How might these journeys become inscribed with meaning in ways similar to the prop? And how does the thrown object in *The Author on the*

*Wheel* shift in space and identity just as the fictional and factual spaces shift in space and identity?

The thrown object relies on motion not only as a catalyst for action, but requires motion for meaning. Without movement, the object remains static in one space. The thrown object exists in a similarly dynamic state; without the throw, the fruit is food for consumption. But after a person hurls the object, the object transforms into a weapon. Even if the goal of the spectator is not to hit or hurt an actor, a piece of fruit thrown toward the stage carries with it a clear meaning: 'I do not approve of this performance/script/person'. Motion, then, is a key characteristic of the thrown object; but even the motion has no meaning apart from the spaces in which it travels. The object travelling through specific (though shifting) theatre spaces creates meaning not because of what it is, but because of where it is going.

Textually, *The Author on the Wheel* already conflates the thrown object with the prop throughout the green room discussions. Thespis humorously recalls his situation the night before on the stage; he endured a barrage of apples and oranges. Sock chuckles about his memory of Mrs. Rant losing her headdress to a Windsor pear. If *The Author on the Wheel* had included a scene of the characters performing the play, oranges and apples would serve as props for the disgruntled spectators to throw. Since the scene of the performance is only described and not demonstrated (or even re-enacted), the fruit thrown at the fictional cast remains in the realm of the world offstage. These "props", in a sense, went on spatial and temporal journeys in the minds of the characters. The audience must visualise what the scene would have looked like by joining the characters in their imaginations.

Now I wish to direct your attention to the thrown object from two different standpoints: first, from the fictional spaces of *The Author on the Wheel* (during the fictional performance of Vainwit's play), and secondly, from the factual spaces of *The Author on the Wheel* (the spaces of Theatre Royal Drury Lane in 1785). The thrown object moves through the spaces of the play while moving through the spaces of the theatre. How does the thrown object inhabit these spaces, and what happens when the fictional and the factual collide?

The journey of the thrown object begins at the point of acquisition. After describing the various roles that props play, Sofer postulates that each different "life" of a prop (whether practical, referential, etc) "begins when an object is plucked from the world and placed upon a stage, where it uncannily becomes at once itself and other than itself" (29). In a similar manner,

the thrown object is plucked from the world and placed (flung) upon a stage. From where in the world, then, was the thrown object plucked? Fruit and vegetables seem to be the most prevalent throws. Scholars have found evidence of fruit sellers in the actual building of the theatre; the fire of 1672 at Drury Lane allegedly originated in the orange seller's stand under the stairs (Dobbs 51). In its original role, the fruit functioned as a snack available to audience members. The fruit that came from a seller in the theatre occupied a place in the audience space of the theatre; spectators needed access to the fruit seller in order to procure the food. Some thrown objects, however, would have come from the outside world and travelled in the possession of a spectator to the theatre. In both cases, the object would have been "plucked" from the world and placed, though not yet upon the stage, in an audience space in the theatre. At this point, the fruit begins its transformation from an innocent-enough snack to a weapon cocked and ready.

How does the fruit execute this transformation? The fruit begins as an object for consumption. In the possession of the spectator, the apple acts as a purchase for their own nourishment. The apple's purpose is to be consumed by its owner. At the point of the throw, the apple shifts from a product of consumption to an agent of production. During this shift, the object fills Sofer's definition of a prop as "something an object becomes, rather than something an object is" (12). No longer an object to be consumed by the spectator, the apple is now an object actively participating in the performance. The crucial difference between the prop and the thrown object is space. The prop goes on a journey from the practitioner space to the performance space, while the thrown object begins its journey in the audience space and travels to the performance space. Both objects are triggered by human intervention. Both objects exhibit motion. Both objects end up on the stage proper. But the spaces from which the fruit flies alters the spatial trajectories and temporal narratives that the objects trace.

The food becomes a weapon in the same manner that an object becomes a prop: when "triggered" by an actor (Sofer 11). The spectators do not qualify as actors in a technical sense, but, in the case of *The Author on the Wheel*, the fictional audience members emerge as the stars of the show because of their (unsanctioned) participation in the production. It follows, then, that an object "triggered" by an audience member might be now considered a prop. The object is "visibly manipulated" (Sofer 11) and moves by "human intervention" (11) – by the spectator-cum-performer. This shift in identity from object to prop correlates with the shift in identity of the spectator who throws an object through space; no longer a consumer of the performance on

the stage, but a participant in the performance, producing both a spectacle for others to consume as well as an obstacle for the performer to negotiate. By throwing the fruit, the spectator causes the prop to enter into the designated performance space while simultaneously creating a new performance space. Moving from consumption to production, the spectator now actively engages with the performers and spectators in a new role of author and performer.

The spatial trajectory travelled by the thrown object calls attention to McAuley's description of the theatregoing experience: one that "emphasizes this sense of inward progression... [of] penetration further and further into the building until [the spectator] reaches the point beyond which one cannot go" (50-51). As the spectator moves through the spaces of the theatre from the entryway through the foyer to the house, they are eventually stopped from any further progress by the threshold of the curtain. Separating the audience from the stage and separating fact from fiction, the curtain partitions the area into a "divided yet nevertheless unitary space" (26). From this perspective, the thrown object follows a flight plan similar to the path of the spectator: further and further into the theatre building until he or she reaches the boundary of the stage. When a spectator hurls an object toward the stage, the spectator's journey into the inside of the theatre instantly lengthens. The moment the thrown object crosses the threshold of the stage marks a crossing over from one world to another. The demarcation between spectator and performer shatters as the object declares the materiality of all present. Entering the stage perpendicularly from the audience space, the object now becomes a part of the performance: an undeniable, dangerous, and meaningful part of the performance.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, the thrown object stands in for the recalibrating identity of both spaces in the theatre and people at the theatre. Audience members penetrate the building from the outside to the inside, while theatre practitioners move into the space similarly, but from an alternate view. The perspective of each individual will impact their journey into and out of the space. Whether performer or spectator, backstage or in the house, invested or indifferent, or even factual or fictional, the characters in the production of *The Author on the Wheel* all meet for a moment in the performance space as the drama unfolds. Where each person and object comes

from as well as where each is going will create new meaning. In this dynamically charged space, it may very well be possible to go beyond the point which one 'cannot' go.

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